

Our heritage

Elbert Class of '35— just too wet to graduate

It was Memorial Day, 1935, but it also was graduation day for the Elbert High School Class of '35. Seventeen-year-old Burton Elsner was a member of that class.

The weather had been lousy in western Elbert County. For about two weeks earlier in the month, it had rained, partially saturating the soil. Now, it was raining again...and with a vengeance...and it was mixed with hail.

At around 9 a.m., Kiowa Creek (which flowed through the center of Elbert) overflowed its banks, leaving mud and water everywhere...and further saturating the ground. It was through this mess young Burton had to walk, when his mother sent him to the store for a steak for supper.

Burton didn't get back home that night for supper, and the Elbert High School 1935 commencement exercises weren't held that night either. For around noon, a

second flood roared down Kiowa Creek, coming "as a wall from 10 to 25 feet high with the speed of a fast horse." Before long, the flood waters were a half-mile wide, and were coming in waves.

The flood didn't take long to do its damage. Elsner, who still lives at Elbert, said buildings didn't merely lift off the ground and float downstream. Instead, "they collapsed with a puff of dust, as though they'd been dynamited." In addition to homes, the flood destroyed a pool hall, a shoe shop, a newspaper office, two creameries, a drug store, the railroad's section house and bunk house depot, a dance hall, a blacksmith shop, a hotel, and the Odd Fellows Hall.

Three die at Elbert

Three persons died, in Elbert. Mrs. Gesche, wife of the section man, went down with the section house (Elsner said she was bedfast, at the time). Mary Goff

and her daughter were lost with the Odd Fellows Hall. Elsner said they were warned, but refused to leave the building.

Two men sought refuge on the roof of their house, but the roof struck a creamery and collapsed. They leaped to the creamery, then when it hit a tree, they grasped a tree limb for safety. A human chain, including Elsner, tried to reach the tree but failed, for the water rushed too fast, so the two men spent the night in the tree before being rescued the next day.

One row of houses and the Catholic Church were spared, despite being in the flood's path. Something (Elsner thinks it was pieces of railroad track) caught hail and debris, creating a five-foot wall that diverted the flood. The Elsner home was among those saved.

About half of Elbert was built on the hillside, where it was safe. Of the few remaining structures along the creek, many were later moved to the hill.

The floodwaters raged on to Kiowa, where they did additional damage. Two more creameries were swept away, as was the City Garage and several residences. A young mother and her infant daughter were washed away to their deaths as three more of her children held onto a tree and watched. The flood claimed at least two other lives, including that of E.N. Marks, who developed pneumonia while trying to clean up the

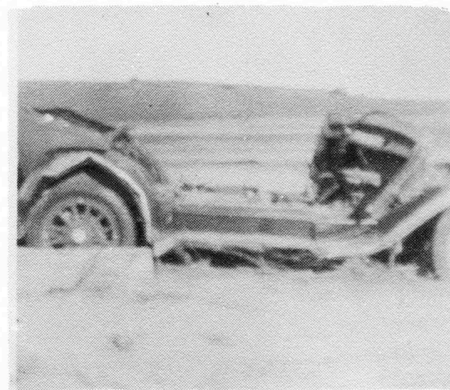
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SCHOOL'S OUT—There were no commencement exercises for the Elbert High School Class of '35 that night, for a raging flood destroyed half the school that afternoon. (Photo courtesy of Burton Elsner)



A FORTUNATE FEW—Colorado & Southern Railroad tracks performed their final service by creating a dam, diverting floodwaters around the Elbert Catholic Church and several residences.



NOT MUCH LEFT—The Elsner family of Elbert saved their home from the flood, but lost their car. The 1928 Pontiac was rolled over and over by the flood, and the Elsners found the remains a mile downstream, after the flood waters subsided. (Photo courtesy of Burton Elsner)

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mud and the muck from his wet, cold blacksmith shop after the storm.

Crops gone, too

In the country, along the creek, farmers and ranchers lost their crops, their hay fields, livestock and chickens. And there were lesser losses, as well: furnishings, vehicles, dishes, and money. Albert Neuman of Elbert advertised: "I will pay \$5 for any information leading to the recovery of my safe, which went down with the flood...."

After the flood was over, the Red Cross, the National Guard and the CCC moved into the county to help clean up. The Colorado State Patrol had to block off the area at Elizabeth, to keep the "Denver souvenir hunters and sightseers" out of the way.

Those who were more well-to-do rebuilt their businesses. Others reopened in other, still-existing quarters. But many, according to Elsner, lost all they had, and simply moved away.

The two communities lost their rail service because of the flood. The Colorado and Southern Railroad track was destroyed, and two weeks later, the company petitioned the Public Utilities Commission to allow it to abandon the segment.

During this stormy period, no one was measuring the precipitation officially. However, the state engineer interviewed local residents, and based on their information (primarily overflowing stock

tanks), determined that 24 inches of rain fell in Elbert between the hours of 1:30 and 4:30 p.m. that day.

The area has endured other floods, as well. In 1878, also in May, a sudden flood destroyed a wooden bridge that crossed a usually dry channel. It's not known whether the Kansas Pacific engineer ever saw the flood waters, for the locomotive, engineer, fireman and brakeman were never seen again. Efforts to find the wreckage were to no avail, but it's believed the huge machine rests on bedrock, some 50 feet below the channel of Kiowa Creek.

In June, 1965, there was another 100-year flood, although the rainfall was much less than that seen in 1935. However, this flood also washed out bridges and road abutments, and caused about \$169,165 in damage.

Losses to this flood were minimized by a series of flood control dams built by the Corps of Engineers and the Soil Conservation Service.

As for the Class of '35, graduation ceremonies were cancelled because the school was damaged beyond repair. "I tell everybody they had to wash the school away, to get me out," commented Elsner.



WAITING IT OUT—Kiowa residents watch as property and lives are lost in roiling floodwaters in 1935. (Photo courtesy of Dave Benjamin)



BEFORE AND AFTER—These graphic pictures show the extent of the damage of the 1935 flood. Taken from the same vantage point, the photo above shows Elbert before the flood, while the

one below shows the portion of the community that survived. (Photos courtesy of Dan Kimzey, Elbert County Land Use Administrator)